

Problematic Teammates (Part I)

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This is the first of two articles exploring the dry deck coaching conundrum of teammate behavior, a dynamic every bit as important to team health and welfare as what transpires in the pool. In this month's issue, the Heidary brothers, head coaches and two of international swimming's foremost authorities on team character and culture, share the foundation of their Character First philosophy. Their principles of work ethic, integrity, humility, and team commitment have guided Orinda Aquatics, and all their programs, for the last 40+ years.)

"To say that my fate is not tied to your fate is like saying, your end of the boat is sinking."

Hugh Downs

A problematic teammate is not simply a swimmer in question, it is a culture at risk.

Problematic teammates can range from isolated incidents to an erosion of culture, and while problematic behavior may innately seem to be a part of sports and teams, or the "nature of kids," it should not be. First, what does "problematic" mean to a team or culture. For a strong team culture, one minute late, or a brief lapse of effort might be problematic, and for a poor culture, it is most likely *much* worse. At either end, expectations and processes must be in place, and understood in advance, to mitigate not only incidents, but their effect on the team.

In the Beginning

As a backdrop, there should be an implicit understanding of expectation and decorum, and this should be woven into every aspect of the team so that there is no lack of understanding of what is expected and what will not be tolerated. As a starting point, our belief is that entry to a team, and the sport, should come with three expectations: 1) embrace the process (the work), 2) embrace the team (those you "process" with), and 3) act with integrity *at all times*. Anything that violates these mandates *should be* "problematic," and not acceptable. Although simplistic in concept, these are all-encompassing and are at the core of all things productive in team sports. Most deviations or errant behaviors tie back to one of these three areas. Every athlete, regardless of age, as well as their parents, must understand this. We talk about expectations and standards virtually daily, always trying to build consensus and sell the cultural mission, and also to create some semblance of a behavioral safety net.

We view expectations and behavioral objectives in three broader areas. The first would be analogous to "securing the perimeter," or the organization, by setting line-in-the-sand minimum expectations of behavior, such as language, respect and integrity. The second is the employment or expectation of athletic virtues such as work ethic, (positive) attitude, team support, etc. And the third, and biggest reach, is imploring athletes to embrace the highest levels of character and integrity in life, outside of the pool, i.e.: drugs/alcohol, cheating, etc. At this level, problematic behavior virtually disappears. Unacceptable behavior may fall at different levels for different programs/cultures, but there should always be process, strategy and methodology that guides response and action.

Common examples of problematic behavior might be: arrives late regularly, negative attitude, poor work ethic (lazy), drug/alcohol issues (rumored or overt), disrespectful to... anyone (athletes, parents, or

staff), bullying, lies, in any context, and so on. Each of these and the countless other possibilities can be tied back to not buying into or embracing process, team and personal integrity.

“If you step in a puddle, don’t blame the puddle.” unknown

Culture

Culture is a tipping point in behavior, either acting as a headwind or a tailwind. With a strong and positive culture, there is a flow or pull to lead, serve and make a difference. This culture tends to “crowd out” poor behavior as kids see no room and no support when acting out. They become outliers. A negative or disrespectful culture has a multiplier effect in the opposite direction. While building a positive and inspiring culture is often an uphill climb (to get buy-in), a negative culture will accelerate much more quickly, as a downhill slide and easily draw in those on the behavior periphery.

Process - The Coach’s Role

Daily activity must exist to mitigate, not only problematic behavior, but problematic *intention*. Things we do are:

1. set behavior expectations *very high*, in the vein of, every athlete should strive to be a leader and role model, to be virtue-driven and not socially driven. We attempt to “sell” this vision and to empower kids to seek and find what and who they can personally and athletically grow into, i.e., exploiting life lessons through sports.
2. regularly evaluate athletes in several non-performance areas that are critical to our culture and development: athletic maturity, personal maturity, effort, team commitment and support, meet commitment, trust with staff and influence on the team (lane, workout, etc.)
3. constantly monitoring athletes of all ages for subtleties and tendencies, or hints of divergence from the above, or being vulnerable in some way.
4. have personal dialogue with athletes that we sense may be at risk of *becoming* problematic.
5. Aggressively convey to the team that problematic behavior is not only a violation of policy or expected behavior, but also a violation of trust, which can be the linchpin to a constructive coach-athlete relationship.
6. One note on cell phone use, as it can certainly be problematic with regard to the team in general or individual athletes. Our view and position is that “good teammates” will engage with their peers as opposed to the phone and vis-versa. Rather than a rule-based (and hard to enforce) policy, we prefer to have athletes/teammates understand the issue in the broader context of interaction and contribution.

Evaluation/Action

Below are the steps we use in the face of significant deviation of team policy or expectation:

1. Review the history of the athlete - duration on team, demonstration of attendance, effort, attitude, connection (in a positive way) to team, relationship with coaches, general integrity, etc.
2. Meet with team leaders with whom we trust implicitly and ask for their perspective on the athlete, i.e.: locker room, team area at meets, etc., the unseen, or in a sense, asset or liability?
3. If the history and input is positive, we meet with the athlete to understand what happened, and why. The action may be isolated, or it may be the beginning of a subtle shift in character or motivation, such as association with a new friend group, a drifting away from the sport, and with it, it’s value and significance in their life.

4. If the history is questionable to negative, there are two courses of action to attempt to alleviate the issues:
 - A. Hold an intervention-type meeting about the nature of the actions and the impact on the team. Try to uncover the motivations and personal issues that drive them. Many times, kids will open up about family issues, self-worth, peer pressure *and* destructive behavior... and ask for help. This avenue can be delicate and sensitive and must be pursued gradually with the intention to help and reverse course.
 - B. If the athlete does not seem to want to rectify the situation, make amends or re-earn trust, it may be time to part ways (i.e., square peg/round hole, or not a fit).

When to Include Parents

This decision can be delicate, and age will typically be the driving factor. On the one hand, the primary relationship should be with the athlete and the coach. For better or worse, that relationship should be nurtured for the athlete to develop a bond with the coach as well as understand accountability to the team. There is a wide spectrum of actions, with some obvious and many not, with regard to notifying a parent. Inconsequential might be, if the child comes a little late, misses repeats in a set, gets social in workout. More serious behavior issues such as getting out early for no reason, doesn't swim a final at a meet, language issues or is rumored to be using drugs or alcohol are another matter. Depending on the age, the severity, and the parent's "need-to-know" we make a determination on whether or not to include the parent, but our first attempt is to resolve the issue constructively with the athlete.

A Real Life (changing) Example

We had a high-level athlete join our team where he had been a part of a toxic culture with severe discipline issues. We were apprehensive at first and met with the athlete and his parents prior to joining. While we knew there might be some risk, our primary objective was to help the athlete turn his life around. He wrote the following to us after only a few months with our team.

"I think about where I would be in life if I was not introduced to this team, and honestly, it is scary. I was becoming a person I did not want to be, and I was not sure I even wanted to swim again, but I have learned what is truly important in life and I am not sure I would have figured it out if you were not there for me. I never realized what it was like being around negative people because that person was always me. Today, I cannot stand to be around negative people and I make a choice not to, and I now only surround myself with the kind of people I want to be like."

Conclusion

Beyond the actual nature of problematic behaviors, the vast majority of kids' poor behavior is either the result of a peer group, i.e.: no leadership, modeling, alternative, or deeper personal issues. In our forty plus years of coaching, at all levels and ages, we have seen behavior issues dramatically reduced with a clear behavior vision for the team and the athlete. A strong leadership-oriented culture, coach vigilance and a deep compassion to help young athletes grow out of personal struggle, into a sense of empowerment and virtue, are the foundation for a winning and life sustaining culture.

"Strong lives are motivated by dynamic purposes." Kenneth Hildebrand